

The opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge

Perched heavily on a white stone wall, a cast-iron stegosaurus watched expressionlessly as a backhoe tore up a patch of land that was supposed to have been left green. “We’ve been doing some more research in the last few months which has already indicated we have to add extra parking,” Mark Looy shouted over the rumbling. “The lobby is probably also going to be too small. That outdoor area with the pillars, that’s going to be glass-enclosed now. That becomes a portico, a kind of pre-lobby for people to gather, get their tickets. Our projections are for more than two hundred and fifty thousand guests in the first year, and so we had to do some expansion.”

Looy (pronounced *loy*) is a gracious, well-fed man with a halo of snow white hair and matching moustache. He is a vice president of Answers in Genesis, America’s largest and most influential creationist organization, and handles “ministry relations”—publicity—for AiG’s \$27 million Creation Museum in northern Kentucky. The glitzy museum, which officially opened in May 2007, is the premier cultural institution of young earth creationism, the belief that God created the universe and everything in it between six and ten thousand years ago. When I visited in September 2006, AiG was scrambling to finish construction. As Looy led me through the parking lot, he proudly called my attention to the landscaping that was transforming forty nine acres of Midwestern flatland into a pleasant, if not quite Edenic, park.

We stepped aside for a minivan, and I noticed the motto on its license plate: “Kentucky: It’s that friendly.” Above that, the driver had affixed the familiar medallion of a giant Jesus fish devouring a smaller Darwin one.

The Creation Museum is seventy thousand square feet of state-of-the-art edutainment, built by set designers with places like Universal Studios on their résumés. Looy watched my reaction happily as we entered the lobby, a walk-through jungle diorama under a soaring forty-five-foot ceiling. A burbling waterfall plunged over a ramble of fiberglass rocks into a glass tank stocked with fish and turtles. On the shore, mannequins of bronze-skinned people lounged under artificial trees while dog-sized dinosaurs frolicked in the bushes around them. Across the hall, a forty-foot sauropod swung its animatronic neck to and fro among the hanging vines.

A museum visitor—possibly one of the charter members whose donations bought them advance admission—pushed his wide-eyed toddler down the corridor in a stroller. From the lobby display alone she was already learning so much. *Long ago, dinosaurs and people were friends.* In another room, the girl would even have a chance to scramble onto a triceratops and sit in its leather saddle.

“This is fanciful, right?” I asked Looy. “You’re not really saying that people rode on dinosaurs?”

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He raised a bushy eyebrow. “What would be fanciful about humans domesticating wild animals?”

Here’s how entrenched creationism is in America: According to a 2007 *Newsweek* poll, 13 percent of self-described *atheists or agnostics* believe that “God created humans pretty much in the present form at one time within the last ten thousand years or so.” Young earth creationism is the most commonly held belief about the origin and development of life, with 48 percent of all Americans embracing it. Another 30 percent believe that humans developed over millions of years but that the process was guided by God. Among evangelicals, 73 percent subscribe to young earth creationism, while 18 percent believe in a long process guided by God.¹

A century and a half after *On the Origin of Species*, the creation-evolution debate is still regularly in the news.² Usually we hear about the creationist movement in the context of legal, educational, and political battles: the lawsuit against a Pennsylvania school district that had mandated the teaching of Intelligent Design; the officials in Georgia who required science textbooks to carry stickers saying “evolution is a theory, not a fact”; the 2007 Republican primary debate where three candidates declined to raise their hand when asked if they believed in evolution. But while all this is important, I suspect that creationism has flourished for the very simple reason that it is very simple.

“When you look at the Bible and you look at the evidence, it makes sense,” says a young mother in the documentary *Friends of God*. “It’s just easy to explain to your children.” Evolution, on the other hand, only makes sense if you understand biology, and biology is not particularly easy to explain. As a result, most nonevangelicals don’t really learn about the development of life until late high school or college, while evangelical kids

¹ This poll is broadly consistent with many others taken over the past twenty-five years. However, it is important to keep in mind some flaws in all of them. Pollsters almost never include a third option, old earth creationism, which holds that there is no conflict between Genesis and “deep time.” It seems likely that at least some people who believe in this identify themselves as young earth creationists for lack of a better answer. Perhaps more important, it is impossible to know what people mean when they agree with the statement that God “guided” the development of life. Do they have in mind supernatural intervention, or do they mean that evolution is an entirely natural process but that God is the source of all natural processes? Believers in the latter sometimes say that God works *through* evolution. This concept, known as theistic evolution or evolutionary creationism, is closer in substance and spirit to evolutionary science than to special creationism, and we’ll hear more about it later.

² Although the debate did not actually begin until the 1920s. As Edward J. Larson shows in *Summer for the Gods*, most American Protestants, including some of those who literally defined fundamentalism, accommodated evolution and an old earth for decades until fossil discoveries made it clear that the theory applied to humans, not just other animals.)

start learning creationism—and anti-Darwinism—before kindergarten. By the time evangelicals are taught about evolution in school, they are well prepared to resist it. Although some surveys show that denial of evolution is correlated with lower education, analysis by sociologists Otis Dudley Duncan and Claudia Geist finds that this is due to the number of poorly educated but less religious people who happen to join devout Christians in their skepticism of Darwin. Among firm religious believers alone, denial of evolution correlates with *high* education. And given that “creation science” is now taught in nearly 190 evangelical colleges, note Duncan and Geist, “the positive relationship of creationism to education among the very religious may become even stronger in the future.”

Today, creationism is a thriving commercial enterprise as well as an educational one. By studying tax returns of the ten largest creation organizations, blogger Jim Lippard found that Americans spent at least \$22 million on creationism in 2004, up from \$13 million in 1999. Much of that money went to lectures and academic texts, but no small amount was spent on what can only be called creationist pop culture.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of books about creationism, starting with board books like *A Is for Adam*, aimed at children as young as two. As kids get a little older, the lessons become more complex. In *What Really Happened to the Dinosaurs?* Answers in Genesis president Ken Ham writes, “If Adam had not sinned, death would not have been in the world, and friendly dinosaurs would still be around. Sin is such a terrible thing, isn’t it?” Authors of creationist children’s books are not afraid to take detours when opportunities arise. In retelling Genesis, *My Creation Bible* says, God “made the first woman, Adam’s wife was she. A man and a woman, that’s what marriage should be.”

Older kids get chapter books like *Life in the Great Ice Age* and *The Lost World Adventures*, which places “characters created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the explosive setting of the creation/evolution debate.” This is the age where attacks on evolution begin in earnest. Books like *Someone’s Making a Monkey Out of You* and *Skeletons in Your Closet* present evolution as a chronicle of scientific blunders and frauds; for creationists, the Piltdown Man fiasco remains the most significant event in the history of evolutionary science.³

Creationist books for adults are more sophisticated, though even these occasionally veer off into high weirdness. *Alien Intrusion: UFO’s and the Evolution Connection* debunks stories of flying saucers and alien abductions by explaining that they are nothing more unusual than demonic attacks. Alien visitors are often said to communicate messages about evolution, which seals the proof of their Satanic origin.

³ The Piltdown Man fossils, “discovered” in 1912 and promoted as evolution’s “missing link,” were not widely exposed as a hoax until 1953.

Those who don't like to read can buy creationism DVDs or listen to the syndicated radio drama *Jonathan Park*, about a renegade paleontologist whose Indiana Jones-style adventures are "based on real places and scientific discoveries." There are also CDs of children's songs with titles like "Darwin's Mistake" and "I'm a K.I.D. (Not a Monkey)."

Answers in Genesis has its own in-house troubadour, Buddy Davis. One of his country-bluegrass ballads instructs kids on the proper way to challenge Darwinist authorities. When faced with a park ranger who says the Grand Canyon was formed by "a little bit of water and a long, long time," Davis sings, "'Were you there?' was all I said / He swallowed hard and his face got red."

This same devastating attack also works on college professors, and it is not simplified for the sake of the lyrics. "Were you there?" is indeed the question that Answers in Genesis advises asking anyone who claims to know anything about the prehistoric past.

Other creationist products include a T-shirt showing a Darwin fish bowing before a Jesus one (it probably knew its alternative was being eaten) and a board game "designed to help fight the brainwashing of an entire generation. It clearly shows that the modern Darwinian theory of evolution is arguably the greatest hoax of modern times." Creation vacations have become an industry of their own, with cruises, summer camps, and nature tours that present antievolutionary interpretations of natural wonders like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Death Valley. Creationist docents offer unauthorized tours of natural history museums and science centers.

Among the creationists' own museums, the Answers in Genesis museum is the newest and most elaborate, but there are several others.

- Dinosaur Adventure Land in Pensacola, Florida, is as much theme park as museum, with dozens of rides and games. Don't expect any downtime: Bible tracts hang over the urinals. The park remains open even though its founder, Kent Hovind, is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence for refusing to pay taxes.
- The Mt. Blanco Fossil museum in Crosbyton, Texas, exhibits model fossil bones of a giant human, proving that the biblical account of such creatures is accurate.⁴
- The Creation Evidence Museum, in Glen Rose, Texas, has a "hyperbaric biosphere," designed to prove founder Carl Baugh's theories that earth's pre-flood atmosphere caused plants and animals to grow larger and live longer than they do now, and also turned the sky a lovely shade of pink.

⁴ "There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown." (Gen. 6:4, KJV)

Before my trip to Answers in Genesis, I had the opportunity to visit two other creation museums. One was at the Santee, California, headquarters of the Institute for Creation Research, the country's second-largest creationist organization; a series of dingy rooms traced the six days of creation and their aftermath through the use of black lights and plastic animal figures. The other museum I visited was a side attraction of *The Great Passion Play* in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, which also takes visitors on a walk from the Garden of Eden through the Great Flood. The Eden room consists of model dinosaur skeletons in front of a painted mural. The audio tour assures visitors that "this garden exhibit pales in comparison to the actual Garden of Eden."

This is a disclaimer the Answers in Genesis museum will not have to make. Its displays may not be as stupendous as the ones designed by God, but they are good enough that no apologies are necessary. In the lobby, I looked again at the dinosaurs outnumbering any other creature, including man. *What is it about creationists and dinosaurs?* I wondered.

"Evolutionists probably use dinosaurs as much as anything to promote their worldview," Mark Looy said. "At science museums, the kids go to the dinosaurs. They bypass most of the other stuff. And we're going to use dinosaurs as a teaching tool, to show that the Bible is true." Before I could ask how, specifically, dinosaurs show that the Bible is true, Looy added a comment that I felt answered the question as well as any: "And frankly, it's an attraction for kids and kids will bring their parents. So there's a marketing aspect too."

Looy promised me a better look at the museum later. A group of pastors would be arriving soon and I could join them for a tour. First, though, he wanted to introduce me to Ken Ham, the founder and president of Answers in Genesis. As we walked through the warren of cubicles and filing cabinets in the private section of the building, Looy told me more about the philosophy of the museum. "To hold the interest nowadays of young people, you got to have visuals, entertainment," he said. "Just a few weeks ago I was at the Field Museum in Chicago. They had a lot of young people there and they were all watching the videos. They weren't standing there and reading about the so-called ape-men, you know? Most people just breeze through a museum unless something really catches their eye." The Creation Museum, he said, would have about sixty video kiosks, hologram-like illusions, and a special-effects theater, where a video spin through history is accompanied by shaking seats, sprays of water, and gusts of wind.

Looy knocked on the door of a corner office, and Ken Ham rose from his desk to let us in. In contrast to the chatty, avuncular Looy, Ham is a somber, imposing figure. Born and raised in Australia, he speaks in a clipped, heavily accented baritone that conveys a combination of boundless suspicion and macho authority. His hooded eyes and lycanthropic chin-curtain beard complete his aura of Old Testament prophet.

Ham gestured to a chair and I sat down. Looy made himself comfortable

on a nearby love seat. Ham sat behind his elegant desk, framed by a giant window overlooking the museum grounds, a row of fossils displayed on the sill. It was an office intelligently designed to induce admiration, envy, or both. According to AiG's tax returns, Ham was paid \$121,764 in 2004, plus \$63,808 for expenses.

Ham came to the United States in the late 1980s, and worked at the Institute for Creation Research for several years before founding Answers in Genesis. A creation museum had been a dream of his since his early days in Australia. "There are people who will come to a museum that you couldn't blow into church with a stick of dynamite," he said. "So you hope to attract non-Christians as well as Christians."

"We definitely will. The whole aim of the museum in an ultimate sense is to stand there and say the Bible is true, it is God's word. Its history in Genesis is true, and we can defend it. We can use observational science to confirm that history. And if its history is true, we are going to challenge you that the rest is true—its message of the gospel, its message of Christian morality." He leaned back in his chair. Through the museum, he said, "we can make some clear statements to the culture and do it in a professional way, without hitting people over the head. It's not an evolution-bashing place, and it is not taking the Bible and bashing anyone on the head."

"That would be refreshing," I said.

Ham didn't smile. "We have tried to maintain the highest of integrity, not to be in attack mode, to be positive in what we say. And we will actually represent evolutionists faithfully, not like some of the secular museums do with creationism. They make claims about what creationists believe that are just simply not true. The natural history museum in New York actually attacks creationists, and calls what they believe *myth*. You know, *the myth of the global flood*. We are not going to do that with the evolutionists. We are just going to present what they say very, very carefully from their own books and materials, and we are not going to attack them like that." He put his palms flat on his desk. "I see a lot of misreporting saying that we're blaming evolution for social ills, or blaming evolution for abortion or gay marriage. That's simply not true."

I started to talk about the other creation museums I'd seen and read about, but Looy interrupted. "Some of those we don't have any affiliation with, because their science might be a little bit suspect." For example, he said, the Creation Evidence Museum, with the hyperbaric biosphere, has "drawn conclusions from fragmentary evidence. They say it's convincing evidence, when we would say it's tentative evidence."

"Do you deal with Intelligent Design at all?" I asked.

Looy shook his head. "We are here to proclaim biblical truths," he said. "I mean, we don't hide anything. Some of the ID people do. They don't tell you who the creator is. There's a kind of caginess we don't care for."

The pastors gawked at dinosaurs in the lobby, waiting for Carl Kerby to kick off the museum tour. Kerby is one of Answers in Genesis's most-requested lecturers and the creator of its extremely impressive web site, which claims more than 1.6 million visitors per month.

"What we want to show here at the museum is how to put on biblical glasses to understand evidence," Kerby told the group as he led us to the first room, where two animatronic paleontologists debated the significance of their finds. "The difference we have with evolutionists isn't the actual evidence, it's the interpretation of evidence," he said. "We'll have a replica of the skeleton of Lucy," the famous *Australopithecus afarensis* discovered in 1974. "Those are the bones," said Kerby, talking fast. "That's the facts. But then you'll go to a museum and you'll find the reconstruction. Well that's the *interpretation*, because quite honestly they didn't find any of the hands!" Kerby became excited. "They didn't find the foot bones from Lucy! Well when you go to the museum, you're going to see human hands, human feet! That was *not found*. That's actually *misleading*. Is our problem with the facts? No, most of the time our problem is with the reconstruction."

The museum's "creation walk" begins in the Garden of Eden, which, predictably, is teeming with dinosaurs. Not just lumbering sauropods either, but swift-footed velociraptors and towering Tyrannosaurus rexes. Not that Adam and Eve need to be afraid. The way Answers in Genesis reads the Bible, there was no death in the world before man's sin, so all these dinosaurs—not to mention the lions and tigers and bears—were vegetarians. Kerby was fairly obsessed with the idea that because God said that his creation was "good," that could only mean that animals did not hunt and eat other animals. This seemed like a strange moral judgment to make about nature, but Kerby disagreed. "If there is a God that used millions of years of death and suffering to get to where we are today, he's responsible for all these ugly things."

Kerby led us to a scene of Noah's Ark under construction. The exhibit went into great detail about exactly how Noah could have fit all the animals into the ark, including dinosaurs (he brought babies). No doubt creationists sometimes wish they could say the dinosaurs went extinct in the flood; that would certainly be convenient, especially since the flood is supposed to be responsible for all the fossils in the world. But that would contradict the Bible, which says that Noah "kept alive" two of *every* animal. So instead, Answers in Genesis teaches that dinosaurs died shortly after the flood, when the transformed habitat made it difficult for them to find food. The distinction between being killed in the flood and dying as a result of the flood seems moot, at least from the dinosaurs' point of view, but this doesn't seem to bother creationists who must set the bar for "kept alive" pretty low. When Noah leaves the ark, God tells him to release the animals "so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number upon it," so apparently this whole transformed habitat problem took God by surprise too.

While the walk through biblical history was eye-opening enough, the Creation Museum also deals with the present day. A room called Graffiti Alley is festooned with spray-painted messages like “Modern World abandons the Bible” and “Today man decides ~~truth~~ whatever.” At the end of this passage is the Culture in Crisis room which shows the walls of a church being smashed by a wrecking ball labeled “millions of years.” Videos show a boy surfing the Internet for pornography and a girl going into an abortion clinic. I wondered how Ham could complain that accusing his group of blaming evolution for social ills was a misrepresentation, but later I found a brochure saying that the problem wasn’t evolution per se but rather “the harmful consequences of evolutionary thinking.” A clever loophole. If the museum doesn’t pan out, perhaps Ham can go into law.

The final room in the museum is the chapel, where members of Answers in Genesis wait to pray with anyone who is moved by what they’ve seen. One young pastor in our group was very impressed with this. “It’s like how other museums dump you out into the gift shop,” he observed.

Back at the lobby, Mark Looy rejoined us to open the doors of the planetarium. The Creation Museum has a planetarium. As I walked in, I looked up to see if it was just a big hole in the ceiling.

In all my travels through evangelical culture, I never felt more acutely that I was in a funhouse mirror universe than while sitting in the creationist planetarium. Leaning back in a comfortable seat, I watched the digitally projected stars spin around the black dome above me. Anyone who has ever sat through a planetarium show would recognize instantly the dulcet-toned narration and majestic but unobtrusive orchestral score. The computer-generated planets would sharpen into focus and the narrator would offer some familiar observation about their size or composition or orbit, and I would almost forget where I was. And then the voice would say something like, “The moon’s scarred surface is vastly different from that of the Earth. That’s because God created the moon for a different purpose than the Earth. The moon was created to be the lesser light that rules in the night. It’s not designed for life as the Earth is.”

Since most of the informational videos and signage weren’t yet installed in the museum rooms I’d seen, the planetarium was the first time I got to hear much detail about AiG’s creation science. Problems stacked up rapidly. Some required an understanding of science to spot, such as the claim that the Earth and moon would have been touching 1.5 billion years ago if they’d really been around that long. But others would stand out for anyone who even had an *interest* in science. “The next planet out from the sun also presents challenges to secular thinking,” viewers are told at one point. “Neptune is almost a twin to Uranus. It’s nearly identical in size, mass, and composition. It even has a similar color. Yet Neptune has much greater internal heat than Uranus. This is a puzzle for secular formations scenarios—but it’s not a problem for biblical creation.” Later I confirmed that this did in fact mean what it sounded like: If something is a “puzzle,” that makes it a lethal problem for scientific inquiry (as opposed to what scientific inquiry exists to solve); on the other hand, creationism has no puzzles

because God can do whatever he wants—create man, make a planet that looks just like another planet but with a different core temperature, *whatever*. If science is the search for answers, creationism is the elimination of questions.

And yet when so much effort, expense, and expertise have been devoted to persuading you that everything you know is wrong, it's easy to succumb. After the museum tour and the planetarium show, I felt like a character in a *Twilight Zone* episode. When I arrived here I felt like I had entered a world that had gone mad. Now I couldn't help wondering if I was the crazy one after all.

The day at the museum ended with a luncheon for the pastors and a PowerPoint presentation by Ken Ham. Although he knew I was in the room, he was talking now for his loyal followers, and the conciliatory language he'd used in his office was gone.

"There is a battle in our culture over the word of God," he said. "That battle goes back to the Garden of Eden and the first temptation: *Can you really trust God?*" The pastors muttered their assent between bites of barbecue pork. "Secular culture's aim is to evolutionize Christians," Ham continued, showing a slide of a Christian family walking into a machine labeled "secular culture" and emerging on the other side as ape-men. Evolution, he went on, is an intentional attack on Christianity. He illustrated this with a cartoon of two castles perched on islands in a sea. One was built on a foundation labeled "evolution" and was flying the flag of "Humanism." Rising above it were balloons representing "abortion," "homosexual behavior," and "school violence." The other castle, "Christianity," was built on a foundation of "creation," and it was under assault. While humanist pirates fired cannons at Christianity's foundation, the Christians were asleep at their posts, or aiming their cannons at the balloons instead of the structure they were attached to. Then Ham flipped to a slide labeled "The Solution." This cartoon showed the Christians blasting the foundation of evolution. The "Humanism" flag was on fire and the humanists were jumping ship. Any reticence Ham had about attacking evolutionists had apparently been overcome.

I realized with some surprise that Ken Ham scared me. I wasn't physically afraid. I didn't think he'd haul off and punch me if I told him that I was a humanist. But his grim affect and coldly irrational imitation of rationality struck me as borderline⁵ sociopathic.

I looked up to see Mark Looy hurrying over to my seat with a giant grin on his face. "Look at this," he said, handing me a computer printout. "This

⁵ Later I read an essay Ham wrote for *Creation* magazine on the second anniversary of September 11: "After the 9/11 attack, I had someone say to me: 'I'm glad I wasn't in the World Trade Center—I would have died.' I replied, 'Well, don't worry, your turn is coming.'" Who thinks that way? Who thinks Jesus *wants* them to think that way? Ham's essay goes on to chastise the country for mourning the victims of 9/11 while forgetting that on that same day "more human beings were killed (murdered) by a different sort of terrorism"—abortion.

just came off the Internet.” It was an Associated Press article headlined, “Skeleton Sheds Light on Ape-Man Species.” Scanning it quickly, I saw that researchers had discovered a nearly complete skeleton of a young *Australopithecus afarensis*; they were calling it “Lucy’s baby.” “The fossil find,” said the report, included part of a hand and most of a foot, “providing the first time scientists have found an *afarensis* foot with the bones still positioned as they were in life.”

Considering that this find undermined, and would possibly demolish, Carl Kerby’s attack on the Lucy reconstruction, I didn’t quite understand Looy’s excitement. Clapping me on the back, he explained that I was missing the point—it wasn’t about the science, it was about the battle. “With our web site,” he said, “we can have a response up in half an hour. In the past it would have taken us weeks to publish something. The evolutionists would have had this story to themselves.” He grinned some more and then said, “We’ll publish something more thorough after we’ve had a chance to examine the evidence.” I almost admired the way he made it sound like an afterthought.

After the lecture, I went up to talk to Ham again. I told him I was a little bothered by his lecture, especially the slides. “You did say you weren’t going to go on the attack,” I reminded him.

His jaw tensed slightly under his beard. “They’re symbolic,” he said, comparing his talk to the Bible itself. “Paul uses a lot of militaristic language.”

“I know you’re not actually advocating violence,” I replied, “but what happened to being positive?” I held up a copy of an Answers in Genesis newsletter Looy had given me. The front page headline was “Evolutionists target children.” An accompanying cartoon showed a white-coated scientist using a dinosaur Pied Piper to lure kids to evolution. I asked Ham, “How is this any different from what you’re doing with dinosaurs here?”

“It’s not.”

“So why portray the evolutionists as villains?”

“We don’t,” he said, looking me in the eye. “That’s perfectly neutral language.”

I skimmed the article. “What about this part where it says, ‘This traveling “science” exhibit is designed to indoctrinate young children’? You wouldn’t mind if someone said that about you?”

“No. There’s nothing negative about *indoctrination*.” Now his voice grew sharp. “The problem is what they’re being indoctrinated into.”

“You call evolution ‘morally bankrupt,’” I pointed out, my voice rising to match his. “That’s not an attack? Have you ever seen a publication from a secular science museum say anything remotely similar about creationism? Or a major newspaper, for that matter?”

“All the time. We get that *all the time*.”

Mark Looy popped his head in between us. “Got everything you need?” he asked me.

The Creation Museum may not dump guests into the gift shop at the end of their tour, but of course there is one. It’s called the Dragon Hall Bookstore. “Could dragon legends be based on fact?” asks the museum guide. “Evidence that Noah’s descendents encountered dinosaurs is the theme of our Bookstore and Gift Shop.” I browsed the shelves numbly, barely registering the medieval motif. *Dinosaurs were dragons*, I thought vaguely. *Dragons were real*. Why not? After a day of spiritual and intellectual battering, I didn’t feel capable of making firm judgments about such things. After all, *Was I there?*

In his office, Ham had told me that in addition to attracting outsiders, he hoped the museum would be “a rallying point for Christians” that would “equip them for creation evangelism.” For Answers in Genesis, creationism is not primarily an explanation of the origins and history of the world, it is a tool for spreading and defending the faith. Professional creationists don’t take much solace from the fact that three-quarters of evangelicals already accept special creation; if that acceptance is too passive, too uninformed, it is essentially useless.

I wonder, however, if Answers in Genesis has overestimated how much “information” amateur creationists should really have. For decades now, ordinary evangelicals have been more than satisfied with their homebrewed and half-baked creationist beliefs. On its web site, AiG has a page of “Arguments we think creationists should NOT use,” because they are either dubious or flat-out wrong, even by the minimal standards of creationism. This page is necessary because creationists, in fact, use these arguments *regularly*, as anyone who has ever written about evolution can attest from his folder of angry e-mails. One of these ridiculous contentions—“If we evolved from apes, apes shouldn’t exist today”—is so popular that even Larry King has used it when interviewing evolutionary scientists. AiG patiently explains what’s wrong with it, but in attempting to dispel ignorance, it only allows doubt to creep in. If creationists are told by other creationists that arguments they’d found so convincing for so long are actually bogus, what’s to stop them from bringing a new skepticism to all creationist arguments—in other words, from doing real science?

Indeed the very premise of the creation museum—that creation science is an all-encompassing discipline that must be applied to the entire history of the universe—undermines the fundamental appeal of creationism, its simplicity. It’s one thing to say “God created man; I’m a K.I.D. not a monkey.” But you have to leave it at that. The museum does the opposite. It demands belief in a whole range of other things that, especially in aggregate, become increasingly difficult to swallow *or* understand. You have to believe that Noah really, literally had two of every kind of animal on the ark. Which means you have to think about what a *kind* is, and how they all fit, and how they got there from all over the world, and what they ate on the ark, and how eight people cared for them all, and how this ungainly ship

stayed afloat, and what the animals ate when they came off the ark, and how they dispersed around the world again, and, of course, what really happened to the dinosaurs.

But don't stop there. Every detail of the Tower of Babel story has to be held to equal scrutiny, and plate tectonics, and distant starlight, and giant humans. It goes without saying that professional creationists have answers to all these questions, and no doubt there will be many visitors to the Creation Museum who will find them satisfying. But if there's one thing I've learned in my travels, it's that despite what too many secularists think, evangelicals are not stupid. An intelligent person might accept a story about the origins of man because they lack the working knowledge to understand its flaws and have never really had to think about the broader implications of that story. But when pressed to affirm that their simple belief requires equal acceptance of beliefs that are much more complex—and in drastic opposition to the “common sense” that was the appeal of the original belief—surely there's a chance, at least, that they will begin to reconsider.

Evangelicals will not, of course, abandon the central tenet of the Nicene Creed that God is the “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is,” but nor do they need to. Theistic evolution—the idea that evolution is the natural process that is the mechanism of divine creation—is accepted by most mainline denominations. If I'm correct that young earth creationism, in flexing its muscle, is inadvertently exposing its weaknesses, then the cultural moment is right for theistic evolution to make inroads among evangelicals. In this context, it's heartening that *Christianity Today* named as one of the best books of 2006 *The Language of God*, an argument for theistic evolution by the noted geneticist Francis Collins. And maybe attitudes are not as hardened as we all think. According to a CBS News poll, about half of all young earth creationists agree that it is possible to believe in both God and evolution. That's a kind of open-mindedness. Perhaps all that is needed is the establishment of theistic evolution organizations with the same resources and pop culture savvy of creationist ones.⁶

Theistic evolution holds that God reveals himself equally through his words, in the Bible, and his works, in nature. Denis O. Lamoureux, a professor at St. Joseph's College in the University of Alberta, writes that “science discovers how the Creator made the world, while Scripture offers the ultimate meaning of the creation.” As such, it is a kind of blasphemy to dismiss scientific findings that don't accord with the Bible.

Because theistic evolution honors natural processes as the work of God, it refuses, when faced with thorny scientific problems, to fall back on supernatural miracles, as creationism inevitably does. For example, here is

⁶ The intelligent design movement, which *is* well funded and organized, is often confused with theistic evolution. One key difference is that while theistic evolution says religion does not *conflict* with science, ID says religious principles can be *confirmed* through science.

how G. Thomas Sharp of the Eureka Springs Museum of Earth History answers the question, in his audio tour, of how the animals got to, and survived on, Noah's Ark: "A great hindrance in understanding is to impose upon biblical reality a natural explanation. I think it is quite possible that God guided the animals into their stalls, where they went to sleep."

Of course it is. But then, it would have been equally possible for God to shrink all the animals down so Noah could fit them in a shoe box, or to lift them all into the air and let them hover in a stasis field for forty days, or to cause wicked humans to drop dead without inflicting the flood on the rest of the planet in the first place. The *God can do anything* explanation is really the opposite of an explanation, and creation scientists know it. That's why they use the "biblical reality" gambit only as a last resort.

Most young earth creationists never accepted the nineteenth-century *omphalos* hypothesis, which argued that the world appears to be ancient because God made it to look that way. Understanding the vast logical, and theological, problems with this proposal, creationists prefer to use other methods to explain away radiometric dating, for example. But lately, the hypothesis has enjoyed a renaissance as an explanation for starlight that appears to have been traveling for billions of years before reaching our eyes. That starlight, it is claimed, was created *already in transit* to us.

By contrast, theistic evolution's equal trust in *the two books of God*, the Bible and nature, frees Christians to do real science. In a 2007 Internet debate between writers Andrew Sullivan, a moderate Catholic, and Sam Harris, a staunch atheist, Sullivan wrote,

I believe that God is truth and truth is, by definition, reasonable. Science cannot disprove true faith; because true faith rests on the truth; and science cannot be in ultimate conflict with the truth. So I am perfectly happy to believe in evolution, for example, as the most powerful theory yet devised explaining human history and pre-history. I have no fear of what science will tell us about the universe—since God is definitionally the Creator of such a universe; and the meaning of the universe cannot be in conflict with its Creator. I do not, in other words, see reason as somehow in conflict with faith—since both are reconciled by a Truth that may yet be beyond our understanding.

If American Christianity could be won over to this view, it would have profound implications for matters beyond science (in this, Answers in Genesis and I are in agreement, though, as with the fossil record, we interpret it differently). In theistic evolution's willingness to accept gaps in human knowledge, I see a reflection of Romans 11:33: "How unsearchable his judgements and his paths beyond tracing out!" And to say that we can't know the mind of God with any certainty is to recognize that we must be wary, at the very least, of imposing moral codes in his name; it is to embrace the quality that Sullivan identifies as *humility*:

You ask legitimately: how can I, convinced of this truth, resist imposing it on others? The answer is: humility and doubt. I may believe

these things, but I am aware that others may not; and I respect their own existential decision to believe something else. I respect their decision because I respect my own, and realize it is indescribable to those who have not directly experienced it. That's why I am such a dogged defender of pluralism and secularism—because I believe secularism alone does justice to the profundity of the claims of religion. The attempt to force or even rig laws to encourage others to share my faith defeats the point of my faith—which is that it is both freely chosen and definitionally dealing with matters that cannot be subject to common consensus . . . Humility requires relinquishing the impulse to force faith on others, to condemn those with different faiths, or to condescend to those who have sincerely concluded that there is no God at all.

It took a few hours after leaving the Creation Museum for my head to clear enough to understand how utterly bizarre it was. Even if there were other creationists out there who were nuttier than Ken Ham—Kent Hovind with his tax-evading dinosaurs, Carl Baugh with his pink sky and giant humans—the ingenuity and sophistication with which Answers in Genesis pursued its agenda pretty much had me persuaded that my quest for the strangest and most hostile manifestation of Christian pop culture had come to an end.

And then I recalled one small exhibit I had seen at the Institute for Creation Research in California. It was a short video titled *Effects of the Copernican Principle*. In it, a creation scholar makes the following remarks:

The great Copernican cliché . . . is that Copernicus dethroned humankind and dethroned Earth from its special place at the center of the universe. It was a demotion. Carl Sagan talks about the great series of demotions for humankind beginning with Copernicus. But if you think about it, to be demoted means to be taken down a notch. The pre-Copernican Earth couldn't be taken down a notch, it was already at the very center, the low point of the universe. The philosopher Pico said, "We live in the filthy and excrementary parts of the lower world." And so to move the Earth from that place to the status of a planet was a *promotion* not a *demotion*.

Such a heavy-handed defense of heliocentrism seemed gratuitous in this day and age—unless, of course, there were still dissenters somewhere arguing that God's chosen planet *must* be at the center of everything. Sure enough, a little hunting turned up the Association for Biblical Astronomy, a tiny but fiercely dedicated organization that holds that science—and a literal reading of the Bible—reveals that the entire universe revolves around the earth.

The president of the association, Gerardus Dingeman Bouw, holds a PhD in astronomy from Case Western Reserve. When I called him up to find out how large the geocentrist movement is, Bouw warned me that I should not trust certain individuals who are not affiliated with the ABA. "What frustrates me," he said, "is that people become interested in geocentricity,

and they have talent, and then they decide to use those talents in promoting their own ideas, which are usually ineffective and not—well, they're off the wall, let's put it that way. They are not based on hard science.”

I had a moment of quiet despair. All my efforts to seek out the darkest corners of this parallel universe had finally brought me to geocentrism, only to find out that even geocentrists insist on distinguishing themselves from *those other, really crazy geocentrists*. Maybe it was time to call it quits.